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Fast Deployment Logistic (FDL) Ships

Strategic Mobility Branch
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Dr. Gantley/2/73262

b. References:

- a. Tolosa, MJ Juneda, DCBOPS/LTC Corp, this office, 201613 January 1967.
- b. Memorandum for Record: DCBOPS, subject as above, dated 18 January 1967.

c. Attached information is submitted as requested.

THE STATE OF MILITARY HISTORY

PAUL BINKLEY
Colonel, Artillery
Chief, Histories Division

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SUBJECT: UNPREPAREDNESS AT THE OUTSET OF WAR

How many wars have been fought where we have been unprepared at the outset (or potential contingencies)?

I. WORLD WAR II

In December 1941 the United States suddenly faced the need to deploy troops to many threatened bases both in the Atlantic and the Pacific. While shortages of trained troops and of equipment were also delaying factors, the principal bottleneck constricting U.S. counter-moves was a shortage of shipping to move and support troops overseas. At this time the U.S. airlift capability was negligible. These shortages played their part in making impracticable any serious effort to reinforce Allied forces in the Philippines and Dutch East Indies, and forced the abandonment of a project for invasion of North Africa early in 1942. As of 10 December 1941, troop transports available in port were sufficient to move only 14,000 men on the west coast and 5,700 on the east coast. There followed a frantic effort to round up commercial vessels, return American ships then in British service, and to enlist British aid. But the first month's effort had to be limited to reinforcement of nearby bases such as Hawaii, Panama, and islands in the Atlantic. The first convoy carrying reinforcements to Hawaii did not depart San Francisco until 16 December, and only about 30,000 troops left the United States by the end of December 1941. In order to provide the first large convoy to reinforce the South Pacific Islands and Australia (about 20,500 men on 22 January 1942), a convoy scheduled to sail to England had to be disrupted and it eventually sailed with about one quarter of its planned strength. Total U.S. deployment through the end of March 1942 amounted to only about 205,000 troops. The shipping shortage continued to constrict all overseas movement through at least the middle of 1943.

II. THE KOREAN WAR

At the outset of the Korean War, the United States was seriously lacking in the capability to deploy troops rapidly to the scene of action. A reasonably rapid deployment was possible only because of the presence of forces at the nearby base in Japan. That base had to be stripped to provide the forces, and rapid transportation to Korea was possible only by scraping together old LST's in Japan, some Japanese vessels, MSTS ships in the area, and by using the meager airlift there (one troop carrier wing). The initial movement of a battalion task force to Korea on 1 July 1950 had to be accomplished with only six C-54's. The rest of the 24th Division moved by water over the next eight days. Two more divisions moved from Japan to Korea by water by 18 July.

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Additional troops in Korea were provided by stripping Hawaii and Okinawa of two RCT's. Movements from the United States were slower getting started. A Marine brigade of 4700 men departed the United States on 14 July and arrived in Korea on 2 August. The Army's Second Infantry Division started shipping out on 17 July but the entire division did not close in Korea until 19 August. Army troop shipments during July totalled less than 17,000 men. Initially, MATS did not have enough ocean-going shipping on the Pacific run to meet requirements and MATS had too few planes. Available MATS planes were initially used to fly critical replacements and items of equipment. MATS increased its planes on the Pacific run from 60 to 250 by mid-August 1950 by diverting them from other runs, contracting with commercial carriers, and borrowing Canadian and Belgian aircraft. MATS increased ships under its control from 87 to 350 by autumn by chartering commercial vessels, and recommissioning ships in its mothball fleet. By all of this took time.

III. THE LEBANON CRISIS

In the summer of 1958, over 15,000 Army and Marine Corps troops landed in Lebanon to help the government there preserve its independence in the face of violent political agitation throughout the Middle East. The landings were unopposed and no subsequent fighting occurred. Yet there remained the danger of a more serious and enlarged emergency, in which the Army would have to reinforce its original commitment by deploying as swiftly as it could elements of the ready strategic forces -- the STRAC -- that it maintained within the United States.

To be effective, the "show of force" had to be mounted quickly. There was no guarantee that this could be done from the United States, for the ability to airlift the needed forces was shrouded in uncertainty. Instead, and largely because of this, the deployment was made almost wholly from Germany by troops assigned to the US European Command

Within the STRAC itself, the two division forces which were earmarked for possible use in the Middle East, although manned and ready, could not be moved in the 30 days allowed them in the then current contingency plan. Neither the Air Force nor the Navy had the required lift capabilities, and on these the Army was absolutely dependent for its strategic mobility. Deficiencies were both quantitative and qualitative. The total airlift capacity of the Military Air Transport Service was estimated at 188 million ton-miles; of this 143 million would be needed to move the air echelon of a two division force into a limited-war situation within 30 days. Thus, while the total was greater than the Army's needs, its full availability depended, first, on the use of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet of over 350 commercially-owned aircraft, and secondly, on the cut-back in current operational requirements elsewhere. Without assurance that both conditions would be met, the Army could not rely on the complete allocation of the aircraft it believed it needed.

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The problem of sea transport was similar: the capacity existed but was largely employed on other missions and would have to be diverted, on short notice and with accompanying delays, to its new assignment. Once accomplished, the surface echelon would then be able to reach the objective area within 30 days, but would not necessarily be unloaded. The bottleneck would appear at the perha sand beaches, where conventional shipping's slow rate of discharge would obstruct the movement schedule. What the Army needed and what it had sought since 1952 was a type of specialized ship -- the roll-on/roll-off vessel -- that could unload usable tactical vehicles and equipment in a matter of hours, not days. One of these -- the first of six that Congress had authorized in 1954 -- was available in Europe at the time of the crisis, and participated in the operation with great effectiveness.

Diplomacy resolved the crisis. Had it been otherwise and had more Army forces been required, the determining factor in their deployment would have been, not unit readiness, nor materiel resources, nor prior planning, but transportation, both sea and air, that would guarantee to the STRAC a true strategic mobility.

IV. THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

To eliminate from Cuba the Soviet offensive weapons and the Castro regime, the US Armed Forces were prepared in the fall of 1962 to launch a simultaneous airborne-amphibious assault on the island within seven days of the order to do so. Despite the fact that the Cuban shore was less than 100 miles away, the problems of getting there were, as so often at other times and other places, paramount. And the seeds that this crisis bore of worldwide danger precluded the large-scale use of resources already employed elsewhere. But the closeness of Cuba would permit the turn-around and re-use of planes and ships, and on this factor alone would largely hinge the success of the proposed deployment.

Three major deficiencies in available transportation required correction. The first necessitated the re-call to active duty of some 14,000 personnel of Air Force Reserve to man or support 24 troop carrier/assault squadrons, some of which would be needed for a Cuban operation, while others would insure a continued capability to airlift reinforcements to Europe, should trouble occur there too.

The second problem involved 11 LST's -- critically needed but not immediately available to transport additional Army forces, particularly armored units, lately added to the troop list. Eleven could be had from the Atlantic Reserve Fleet, but these were in "mothballs" and would take time to re-commission. While this was taking place, four such ships, none of adequate military utility, were chartered from commercial sources and pressed into service as a poor expedient.

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The final problem was a long familiar one, involving as it did the Army's repeated requests for a specialized type of amphibious ship, the roll-on/roll-off vessel. Six had been sought since 1954, and 19 more were requested after the successful experience of the USNS Comet during the Lebanon crisis. In October 1962, two existed, along with a Beach Discharge Lighter which would be needed to unload them from offshore during an actual assault operation. Neither ship was without its limitations, but together they pointed the way toward the development of an appropriate vessel for the strategic deployment of Army forces. (S)

V. THE DOMINICAN CRISIS

American sealift and airlift resources were adequate to meet the modest demands of the Dominican situation, although there were temporary strains on the airlift capabilities during the early phases of the operation. Marines from the Caribbean Ready Amphibious Squadron were offshore when the initial order to land troops was issued. Reinforcing Marine units deployed during the next few days by sea and air without major problems.

As the Dominican situation became more critical and the requirements for troops increased, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed that the entire airlift resources of the U.S. Air Force be employed in the operation as required with the exception of the absolutely minimum essential airlift required to support the operation in southeast Asia. The demands in the Dominican Republic soon exhausted the airlift capabilities of the Tactical Air Command, however, and the airlanded elements of the first two combat battalions of the 82nd Airborne Division had to wait until the aircraft of the parachute echelon could be recycled from the Dominican Republic. About 95 percent of the U.S. Strike Command airlift was committed to EAF Operation during the first week and it would have been impossible for the U.S. to have supported a second operation during this period. Approximately 133 C-130's were used in a continuous shuttle service during the first six days and the planes carried over 8,800 personnel and 5,100 tons of equipment to the Dominican Republic. (S)

The proximity of the Dominican Republic to the United States was fortunate in that the planes could be recycled rather rapidly and the sealift could assume the task of resupply during the second week of the crisis. A more distant operation might have required that the heavy airlift demands continue for a much longer period; a swifter sealift capability, on the other hand, might have lessened the strain on the airlift resources and permitted their quick release.

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